

Walter Chambers 00:05

Me coming to you rather than you...(unintelligable)

Robert Curvin 00:08

This is better. This is great. So okay, Walt you're on.

Walter Chambers 00:13

I'm Walt Chambers, native Newarker, born and raised in the Ironbound, Down Neck section of Newark. Really, even though I now live just across the border, as I call it in East Orange, I still call Newark my home and everything that I do is Newark based. So I'm certainly pleased to talk about Newark, that's my city.

Robert Curvin 00:40

Well, let's start by just talking about your, you know, your youth in the city and growing up and what it was like where you went to school? What were some of the relationships you have, what's some of the things that you remember about race, what your parents said, and that kind of thing

Walter Chambers 00:58

Alright, my, my background, as I mentioned, is Down Neck Newark, the Ironbound section, the East Side of Newark, whatever term you want to use, I went to elementary school in Down Neck graduating eighth grade from Oliver Street School, and went on to graduate from East Side High School. So I and but backing up from that I spent my formative years from age, well, I was going on 11 years old until age 26, when I left to be married in a public housing project, the first public housing project in New Jersey actually predates World War Two, opened in 1940-41 Pennington Court. And uh so that's where I spent my years and the experience there and throughout my youth was, as we say today, a diverse or integrated, while Pennington Court was, in the strict sense, segregated, there were four units and at that time, public housing was low rise three stories. Each building had either 2, 4, 6 apartments, or nine, and that's all in a single building. So it didn't have the high density that post World War Two housing, the high rises that we knew, Scudder, Hayes homes, etc. But my, the experience there was, there were three units that were all white, and one that was all black, or as we said in those years, Negro, or colored. Gosh, that's another story. I can tell you how for many years, right into the 70s and beyond you didn't use the term black and older folks, but that society is..

Robert Curvin 01:00

Black was considered to be derogatory.

Walter Chambers 03:06

Everything about it. I used to I used to, I used to to teach that. Yes, don't use black. But that's a sidebar, right. But growing up in Newark, to me was a good experience. I was never one uncomfortable, of relating to whites, because that's how I grew up. As an example, when I tell this story and you talk about the city of Newark today, as it was back in my youth, late 40s, late 30s, early 40s. Throughout my

school experience K through 12, I never had a black teacher. All of my teachers and all of the administrators I saw, I only knew a few black teachers in the school system, one of whom was a very famous one, Carrie Powell, who was we were all out at the same church and she's a very close friend of my families. And Mrs. Powell, of course, we all looked up to because she was a school teacher. But I never had one. But at the same time, I didn't feel in any way that a form of racism that existed. Although in retrospect, I knew in my high school years that I didn't get the kind of guidance that I should have been getting. And it was fortunate that my mother worked for two teachers, both of whom taught in Newark the Bernsteins Julius Bernstein, who eventually became superintendent of schools in Livingston. I forget his wife's name, but, but she taught at Central and in his teaching years he was at East Side. And my mother worked for them.

Robert Curvin 05:03

As a?

Walter Chambers 05:04

As as a, as a service employee she...

Robert Curvin 05:08

A domestic.

Walter Chambers 05:09

As a domestic.

Robert Curvin 05:10

The work that our parents did.

Walter Chambers 05:12

Yes. And there was no stigma associated with that I can tell you a bit about my experiences with my mother as a domestic. My father, by the way, was a worked for the sanitation department he was, quote, a garbage man, he worked in the old fashioned garbage trucks, where they literally use muscle to take the can and throw the guy was up in the truck running through it up in the truck, he emptied it and threw it back. My father who by physique was a sort of a smaller man, but muscular. And he had a route he was on the sanitation routes near East Side high. So I would see him quite often as I was walking to school, and I was proud of that there's my father, up in the truck. And there was no stigma to that. You know, although my mother and father separated at an early age, and that's another sidebar story for me about growing up in a single parent home. And people talk about, "Oh, the kids today, that's why they're scarred". I don't buy into that. But again, stay on the subject. But so I, I had, I think, a good social experience growing up, that I could relate to whites in in a very normal way, that those are the people I went to school with. Those are the people I lived with, and so on. So we related to other to each other in a very positive way. I know of no particular incidents that happened other than my freshman year at East Side there was that a white black altercation. But the truth be known, it started around a black girl, and who was socializing with on lunch hour with some of the local white guys, and some things got out of hand and rumor took over and there was a little altercation, which made, as a kid, some of us consider transferring out of East Side and going into where we thought we'd be more

welcome. But I said, "Uh-uh this is my neighborhood school I'm not leaving." In the next three and a half years, I've never experienced any problem anywhere remotely near that. And that incident passed over. And when I graduated from East Side in June of 1947, 48, 48. At that time, we had the largest graduating class Newark, in that era had two commencements in January, and in June, I graduated in June 1948. We had 300 in my class this was the biggest class that East Side at that time. There were seven blacks. And I've been today there are only two of us, maybe three still living.

Robert Curvin 08:14

So what was the general environment like at in Down Neck, as they call it, in terms of there's a lot of social activity, recreational activity, you had the park, you had Rupert Stadium?

Walter Chambers 08:28

Yeah. There was a great deal. In many instances, we didn't have to go above Broad Street for our entertainment. And we, of course, there was Rupert Stadium, which was the home of the Negro Baseball League, the Newark Eagles played there, always on a Sunday. And I like to tell the story that I was reared in a very strict Baptist home, and you didn't do anything but go to church on Sundays. And my whole life, I never saw the Newark Eagles play because their games were on Sunday. We used to see people going down there, they'd pass right by Pennington Court going down South Street, to get to the Stadium. See them going down and back. But I never once saw them play because their games were... they're on the Sabbath. And my, uh, strict grandmother was like "Uh-uh, you don't do anything, but go to church on a Sunday."

Robert Curvin 09:29

And there was Ballantine beer factory and a lot of factories.

Walter Chambers 09:32

It was heavily heavily industrialized. Yeah. In Down Neck. And even to the point of seeing DuPont as an example in the south end of the East Ward well we should use the term Ironbound because we didn't say East Ward then and that was belching out all this smoke when you talk about environment and pollution. We didn't know from that. And you saw all this stuff smoking coming over and whatever. But in retrospect, you know that that was pollution first class. Sure. And, but, you know, who knew?

Robert Curvin 10:17

So, after high school, you went off,

Walter Chambers 10:21

I, uh, when I was growing up from elementary through high school. My ambition always was to be a medical doctor. That was in the, in my yearbook, you'll see a little symbol, a doctor's satchel, in that sort of thing that doctors bag. That was my ambition. So I went on to Lincoln University.

Robert Curvin 10:47

To where?

Walter Chambers 10:47

Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, and I got to Lincoln, I had heard of Lincoln and whatever, but I got there by way of the personal sidebar counseling, if you will, that the Bernsteins gave me, not from my guidance counselor. And I was a college prep Honor roll student, Honor Society, all that sort of thing. But all I got when the guidance counselor called you in, well, how are your applications coming? And just general questions, no direction and whenever the Bernsteins realized this they never said it, but they fulfilled the role for me, they had me applying all over the place, Bates, Swarthmore all these schools. And then he said, "Well, what about Lincoln?". Okay. And I applied to Lincoln, I got accepted to Lincoln. In fact, my acceptance to Lincoln came two days before I scheduled I just scheduled for an interview at Swarthmore. And I said, "No, I'm gonna go to Lincoln, nevermind Swarthmore." And I, uh, incidentally, I never regretted

Robert Curvin 11:55

No regrets?

Walter Chambers 11:56

Never.

Robert Curvin 11:56

And then you came back to New York after, after

Walter Chambers 11:59

Back to Newark after graduation in 1952, did two years of military you know, they had the draft at that time European (?) conflict era, and then I came back to Newark, after the service so early 1955 had some temporary jobs and, you know, looking to get my real first job with a Bachelor's degree. And I was referred to then this is right after the charter revision and Newark had an agency called the Mayor's Commission on Group Relations, which was right up my alley, I was a psychology major in college. And I was recommended by a number of people to apply. And of course, it was a politically appointed job. As the name indicates the Mayor's Commission, so you had to be literally appointed by the mayor, who was Leo Carlin at the time. So I had an aunt, who was very much involved in politics. When Blacks were Republicans. Okay, back in the day, remember, late (unintelligable) Republicans to the party of Lincoln. So, most Blacks who were politically active, and Essex County was dominated back in that era by Republicans. But uh Newark was so called nonpartisan, but but I got the people that my aunt knew and others knew to back me and recommend me to the Mayor's Commission. The director at the time was Daniel Anthony. And, but people like Grace Fenderson, Grace Baxter Fenderson and so on any number of people, uh, I interviewed with and they supported me, recommended me and I got the job in October of 1955. And became assistant director.

Robert Curvin 14:02

And, what was it called the Mayor's

Walter Chambers 14:06

The Mayor's Commission on relations. And I'm sure that people like Alan Lowenstein, Dean C. Willard Heckel, and others who are very much involved in charter change saw to it that such an agency was put in I'm sure it didn't didn't evolve from the politicians. And they, the purpose of the commission really

was more an educational thing. They had no real authority in the sense of subpoena, of uh, it was investigation and referral. Okay. But the fact that it was there was very helpful. I think it's one of my very first assignments was now in 56 was to be involved in helping the Clinton Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council get off the ground. And I worked very closely with with those folks, and was very much engaged in they're very big. They're very big community conference, Stanley Winters and others who were involved in that. And Stanley and I have a friendship to this day, right? It dates back now over 50 years, And, uh, but that was one of my early assignments. And shortly after I got there, Dan suggested that I go ahead and get my Master's in the field, and at the time, New York University, through the school of education offered a Masters in Human Relations. And so I enrolled there in 1956. Got my master's in 58. In human relations.

Robert Curvin 16:00

Now, do you recall at that time, what, even though you didn't have enforcement power? People were bringing issues? Just concerns. What were the major concerns that people of color had?

Walter Chambers 16:13

A major, a major issues at that time in that era, and this even predates me going into that job in the 50s. But I remember this as, as a child, police-community relations. Well, that is the issue. Within that context, in 1957, in a final report, issued in 59, the Mayor's Commission engaged a marketing firm organization, the Market Planning Corporation of New York City to conduct a detailed study, on in effect on race relations in Newark. And they based this on a lot on interviews throughout the city, what people thought, felt, and experienced. One of the things that came out of that study that was issued in the report in 1959 was that police-community relations is a very critical issue in the city of Newark and, if not dealt with, could lead to serious problems. Remember the years that I just noted 1959? And what happened in 1967, around a police-community relations issue?

Robert Curvin 17:46

Explosion.

Walter Chambers 17:47

There you go. So but when we issued that report, within the political community within City Hall and others, particularly within the Police Department, that was held to **pay**, you know, "Why did you do that?" and that, and Dan and I in particularly Dan darn near lost his job. He left within a year after that. After much intense pressure. Classic. That you were doing this study a disservice by making that public, because that was a big headline, particularly in the late lamented Newark Evening News when they reported on it. And, but but people did not want to admit that this was a problem. As a child, as I mentioned, growing up, we were always taught Don't ever let the police get you directly if they take you to headquarters, or a local prison, that you're in for a beating. That was that was just assumed that that that was going to happen to you, if as a black, the police took you in. So, police were to be feared is the way it went. And everybody knew somebody who had that experience. And there was always denial on the other end, "Oh no, this doesn't happen." One of the the jobs that I had when I was with the Commission, and we had prevailed upon the Police Department to include I call it at least some mention of human relations in in rookie training. At the time, Police Department had their Police Academy, way up on 18th Avenue of the upper end almost, I guess coming into South Orange, I guess

that is. And so we used to go up there and get I don't know how many weeks they were in training. But we had four hours, two two-hour segments to talk about race relations and all. And some of those sessions. I mean, when you saw the attitudes, most of whom were white of these guys, police recruits in training, you could almost tell there's going to be trouble. And some of the guys, the names that I remember, in their vitriolic reaction to race and whatever. I said, "You...I'm gonna see something, read about this guys". And very often within two years, I'd say, "I remember that guy from the training"; they got in some kind of trouble.

Robert Curvin 20:42

So there was no screening of any

Walter Chambers 20:44

Not not at that time no. You pass the test, the written and the physical review you were in. I remember one particularly bad session with them. Remember now this is just two two-hour segments. And it's so happens this I always remembered the because in the class in this rookie class, was a white guy. Teddy Rubel, who grew up with me in Pennington Court, graduated high school with me from East Side High. And then several other blacks in the class the guy, the late Clinton Thomas was in it, he went to high school with me and so on. And these guys were giving me a hard time. And Ted and Clinton stood up and said, "Hey, wait a minute. I know this guy Walt chambers. Now you guys shut up and listen to what he has to say." I always remembered that. That was...

Robert Curvin 21:47

So you know, they stood up for you?

Walter Chambers 21:49

Yes. Yeah.

Robert Curvin 21:50

And that was that's a kind of a fascinating story about the power of your relationship. They got up and you said no, personal knowledge of each other made a difference. So that's why they were...

Walter Chambers 22:04

And there was that there was a lot of that my, my family, you know, going back to my mother see our family. We are not Depression refugees to Newark. My grandparents came here from Virginia, particularly my maternal and also on my father's side. That family came from Georgia. On my mother's side. They came from Virginia, way back in the late 1800s and settled in Down Neck Newark. My grandfather, my maternal grandfather was what I called an entrepreneur, William Epps? was his name. He had, I call him a precursor of UPS. He had a horse and buggy and delivered packages and parcels, and did moving and whatever I got, I still got his business card. Okay. And, and so my mother was born in Newark, and all of her siblings were born in Newark, uh, very early 20th century and up. I was born in Newark and born in a house 41 Camp street. That's just below Orchard Street in Newark. It's not there anymore. It's between Orchard and Mulberry. That's where I was born. Back in those years, most of us were born in the house, you were, a midwife that was a big thing. You weren't born in hospitals that came later. Now my children were born in the hospital Beth Israel, right, but we go back four or five

generations in the city of Newark, we're not newcomers. Uh, and there are many other families like that I think of Dr. E. Alma Flagg. Her family grew up in our Ironbound. She's a graduate of East Side High, and so on. So there are many of us can point to Newark as our roots going way back. But I say that to indicate that the area in which we grew up the Pennington Street area that my family lived there before there was a public housing project, (unintelligible) couple blocks down, but our roots go back to that. And that area was always integrated. I remember there was a, a meat market that we used to go to was called McCarter meats. It was located McCarter highway and Edison Place for years. And one of the guys who worked in there, grew up with my mother right around the corner. And he knew her Marian and whatever they were first name basis. But there were there was, uh, when I first went into City Hall with the Commission in 1955, there was a guy working in the Mayor's office as one of the aides to the Mayor, Willie Gillcider was his name, who was Jewish, who lived around the corner from us, and knew my family, and so on. So you point to it to the different ethnic or religious group. And they existed in the Down Neck, Ironbound area of Newark. And again, that's the climate in which many of us grew up. And so there was a, in many instances, a positive relationship, but at the same time, there were definite ethnic pockets that existed in Newark, I always said, if, if a stranger came into Newark Penn Station or the Airport, and you ask, "Well, where most of the Italians live? Where most of the Jews live?" and so on, and so on. People could point to the various sections of Newark. And that would be true. That's exactly the way Newark was laid out, and existed for many years. Really right up to the mid 60s. But prior to that, what really expedited, I'll say, accelerated, the change in Newark, back in the 50s was the rescinding of rent control. That more than anything, I think, really accelerated the changing neighborhoods, as we said, then, because what happened that many, particularly in the south end of Newark, Clinton Hill area, Weequahic section, where you had some pretty elegant apartment buildings, and there, and blacks at the time, were very much confined to Central city. And then scattered throughout. I think you grew up in North Newark right??

Robert Curvin 27:11

I grew up in Belleville.

Walter Chambers 27:14

North, border, right. And there were. as you recall, there was a pocket of Blacks up in north Chester Avenue, all through in that way. But then you scattered all, you had them all over, right, but there was a concentration, in what we now know as the Central Ward, then called the Third Ward of Newark. Now, what landlords when when rent control was lifted,

Robert Curvin 27:42

What year was that do you know?

Walter Chambers 27:45

Somewhere in the 50s.

Robert Curvin 27:46

In the 50s?

Walter Chambers 27:47

Yes. So landlords then took many of these up those apartment buildings, and cut them up and made two apartments where there was only one and lifted some of the services that they had in these apartments, and so on, and charged the exorbitant rents that they could get now, you know, market prices, I guess they call it and but since there was a pent up need for housing, and then many Blacks moved, and then there was on the, on the other side, there was a movement of Whites out of the city. First, there was a movement of them moving more from Central Newark, further South, further West, and then beyond the borders of Newark. When in the 50s, Newark had a population of, I believe, somewhere between 500, 600 thousand

Robert Curvin 28:55

Lower than that, but it was it was well over 400,000

Walter Chambers 29:00

But it was a very thriving city. I think about Newark, this is something I'm suggesting to the Newark History Society do a program on, Newark's downtown district. When you think about when you think about Newark on weekends, Friday, Saturday, in particular wall to wall people, you couldn't move at Broad and Market on weekends in the city of Newark, with shopping with entertainment you know, we even had two burlesque houses in Newark, did you know that? One , uh, the Empire

Robert Curvin 29:41

That was the only time I ever played hooky. Going with the gang to the burlesque. One of our schoolmates had joined the chorus line.

Walter Chambers 29:53

And, like Rupert Stadium, I never went too young I guess. Or scared to go. But but the burlesque houses existed at least one right into well, it was when Leo Carlin was mayor. His story was that the Church, (unintelligable) the Catholic Church put a lot of pressure on him to get rid of it. But that brought a lot of people to Newark on weekends, because only Newark and Union City had burlesque. So New Yorkers and others would come over here. Yeah, I've forgotten what the name was what the what became the Adams Theater was a burlesque house at first. And then the other one was at the corner of Washington and Branford. And so, but Newark and all the movie houses that we had see like my neighborhood movie house was the Realto, which was on Broad Street right across from Newark City Hall. Right. As a kid, we used to go there every Saturday, right?

Robert Curvin 30:55

Watch the serials right?

Walter Chambers 30:56

Yes. And you'd spend the whole day at the movies, you get two movies, you get the serials, the chapters, previews, that was an all day outing to go to the movies.

Robert Curvin 31:08

Like 10 or 15 cents, right?

Walter Chambers 31:09

The movies would change from Saturday, and then there'll be a new movie coming out on Sundays. Now other neighborhood kids would go back on Sunday. But again, from for me and my family, I never went to a movie. I didn't go to a movie on a Sunday until I was in the service. And the first time I did that, I thought the movie was gonna fall down around me. That I'm sinning to be in this place on a Sunday. But, again, that's the the influence of a strict religious family.

Robert Curvin 31:44

So let's talk about post or toward the end of Carlin. You're still at the...Human Relations

Walter Chambers 31:54

Yeah, I worked at Newark City Hall from 1955 to 1966. Was was getting toward the...let's see I've forgotten when the change came when Addonizio came.

Robert Curvin 32:07

62.

Walter Chambers 32:08

Okay. But but as I said, I did then I went to work for the the right up the street to the old Kinney building and Broad and Market, I worked for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, because we used to do some cooperative work with them. And they made me an offer to be Assistant Director. I left City Hall because I saw that as dead end. You know, I had a my job was eventually made the Civil Service, but I didn't see that as I didn't take to that climate at all, you know, the hours back then were nine to four. Those are the posted hours, including perhaps a two hour lunch. Okay. So you got off at four o'clock, what do you do? It's too early to go home. So you very often hang out at the bar or something like that. And that wasn't that wasn't for me, that was you know, by by then a young married with a family. And, and I saw this going nowhere. So I left city, city government moved right up the street to the Commission in 1960. Now Carlin came in 62. By this time, Dan and

Robert Curvin 33:30

Addonizio came in 62.

Walter Chambers 33:33

Addonizio. I'm sorry. And then at almost simultaneously or shortly after he came, Dan Anthony left. And now I'll always remember, and I knew Hugh Addonizio as a congressman, because we worked with Calvin and Larry. We had a very vibrant organization, the Central Ward Young Democrats, even though I didn't live there but it was, you know, a group of us who knew each other socially. And it was a dynamic group, we would give great socials and campaign parties. It was a big thing. Anyway, I was given an offer when Dan left to come back as director of the Mayor's Commission. And personally by Addonizio and Larry, he called me to his office and, you know, made the offer and I politely said, "You know, well, let me think about it", knowing all the while. This is not for me. And I'm certainly glad I didn't

Robert Curvin 34:36

Who was heading the National Conference of Christians and Jews?

Walter Chambers 34:39

A guy named Howard Devaney.

Robert Curvin 34:40

Howard Devaney who was really, uh outstanding.

Walter Chambers 34:41

Yeah, interesting (unintelligible), Howard's background was a policeman. He was a policeman out of Glen Ridge. He became head of the state PBA and at the time, the National Conference of Christians and Jews was getting into nationally into programs on, uh, police-community relations. And with Howard's police background, they got him to be director. I think he was preceded, interestingly, in that job by Dan Anthony. Dan Anthony was the director I think, before he went with the city. But anyway, uh, and so I worked with, with Howard there and my specialty was youth programming. We ran a very successful what we call Brotherhood Youth Institute, where each summer for a week, I took 150 high school students from all over the state, and some from out-of-state to go away to a camp and had an intensive living, educational experience in intergroup relations. I still hear from some of the graduates of that program, many of whom went on to outstanding things. One of probably one of my most renowned graduates of that program was a guy named James, we called him Jimmy Horton, who is a distinguished historian out of George Washington University. Well, Jim Horton was part of my program.

Robert Curvin 34:46

Is that right?

Walter Chambers 34:52

Clem had him in a few years ago for a lecture. And made it possible for me to have a one on one luncheon with Jimmy and his wife.

Robert Curvin 36:33

Oh how nice.

Walter Chambers 36:34

Yeah. But he still talks about the influence of that program. On his life. Yeah. But anyway, so I worked for them. In 1963, they promoted me to Director of the Queens New York region, I became the first Black Regional Director. And that was October of 1963. In, in January 1964, New Jersey Bell Telephone Company called me.

Robert Curvin 37:09

1964.

Walter Chambers 37:10

I'll never forget it the first workday of 1964 right after the holidays, I got a call that my name had been suggested to them and a possible job. Now, as an aside, all of this was made possible by activities of Newark, Essex CORE. That was that they were in some heavy, heavy discussions with the phone

company at that time. And then and New Jersey Bell realize that they didn't have anybody in their personnel department to help them make this change to providing equal employment opportunities. And, and they wanted to do that. And so a number of names were suggested. And mine was, and I eventually got to serve.

Robert Curvin 38:00

And I'd love to hear what it was like to enter a company that and as you know, I was part of the negotiations, and I remember very well how we had demonstrated and, and they then sort of became almost advocates.

Walter Chambers 38:19

Yeah, they did.

Robert Curvin 38:20

They really did. In fact, I remember one of the executives a guy named Don Stevens. I'm sure you've...

Walter Chambers 38:25

Don Stevenson. Yeah.

Robert Curvin 38:26

Stephenson, yeah. He said to me once, he said, you know, the telephone company is like a battleship. And it's hard to turn. And it takes a while. But if you turn it on a course, it will, it will keep going on that course, is that what you?

Walter Chambers 38:42

Yes, that is exactly right. Yeah. When they become committed, you know, and he's right. And that's exactly what happened. All those years, you were doing a lot of dealing with a man named Jean Felker. Outstanding, sort of a strange guy, but extremely bright, extremely committed. Right. And he was he was the Operations Vice President, second in command and then company, and he was the point man, in all of these discussions. And so when I came in the company in March of 64, and these, these discussions and negotiations are at their peak at the time. I remember the first week I was in that company. I was working wet (?) hours, well into the night, weekends and whatever and, and I was so shocked when I started getting my first paychecks and then included overtime. I'm not used to this, you know, the kind of work I do, you know. There's no such thing as overtime, and I was management. I was second, I came in at second level management, which was unheard of. I didn't know anything about levels in corporate. Didn't mean anything to me, which was another fascinating experience, negotiating my salary and working conditions when I came. But it worked. But I I saw that kind of commitment early on. And when all of this was over, when you reached agreement and things were suddenly laid out, I always remember that Jean Felker. Now I've been in a company a month, called me to his office 20th floor at 540 Broad Street, our headquarters building and said, "I would like you, you know, Bob Curvin?" I said, "Yes, sir, I do." "Well, I would like you to get in touch with Bob. And I want you and Bob to come and make a presentation to the officers of the company. I want them to share and experience some of the things that I learned in all of these discussions." And you remember it and I got in touch with you. And you and I want that there to their staff meeting and talked to the officers, which

was absolutely unheard of. I had a boss at that time, I guess, we became very good friends right after his death. We'd been in the company 35 years or so at the time. 30 years. So all my years, I've never been to the President's Office. How could you get there? I just said myself, I know, I make the man (?) call me. You know, well, in corporate clinically, at that time, it was always very level conscious, everything that they did, you know, it was very, you're very level, conscious. Hard to imagine I tell that story to people even within the business. No! I said, it's true, okay. And nobody thought anything of it. Okay. So I, I was manager of the Women's Employment Office, all women reporting to me, I even thought as a sidebar, this was another test to see how I, a Black male, will relate to white women in that environment. I was mature enough and knew that you don't socialize in there. And even when I went out in operations at my group of, in the, with, uh called the traffic department, telephone operators, again, all women, and even there, it was structured, women could go up to being first level supervisors, but no higher. And all the all the managers and above were all male. So I went out as a manager. So all the people beneath me, were female. And in that organization, as big as it was, there was a lot of socialization, somebody retires, the service anniversary, there's a dinner, there's a party, and so on. And as a manager, you were expected to go, to be there. And you were even expected to provide the entertainment, you were the emcee. And you were this and that. So I was two, three nights a week going on these events. But I knew I don't socialize. I had certain rules in my own head. I don't dance than anybody. I don't buy anybody a drink. I don't walk anybody to their car. I don't give anybody a ride home. There is no absolute socialization, [everyone is] nice to each other and whatever, but there was certain internal internal code that you should operate by.

Robert Curvin 48:09

And you understood that as a black male. These to behave in a normal way would be a risk.

Walter Chambers 48:19

Yes. Yeah, you don't do that. You're gonna get it. Okay. That was an era. Now we're now we're talking there's mid 60s that this kind of socialization upset a lot of people. And I didn't want it and didn't need it. Okay. So. So I didn't do it. And so you can never accuse Chambers of that I got the reputation of being a square, which is alright with me. Okay.

Robert Curvin 48:45

Nothing like a successful square.

Walter Chambers 48:47

Exactly. So I, uh, so shortly after that, I was promoted from second level in 1967, to third level, which was again, you know, unheard of. And then two years later, I was promoted to fourth level, then that was in 1969. I sort of plateaued for I good jobs at fourth level. Before I eventually in 1985, made fourth level Assistant Vice President. And the irony is that when I in 1985, remember now I started in 1964, when I was promoted to to fifth level, yeah, Fifth Level, Assistant Vice President, I was assigned to the job Assistant Vice President in Human Relations, the same job of the man who hired me in the first place. 21 years later. Yeah. So I always got a big kick out of it. I made the job. The guy who called me in 64 and hired me. I'm in that job. I wrote to Bentley (?)

Robert Curvin 50:01

You think they knew that?

Walter Chambers 50:03

No, nobody knew.

Robert Curvin 50:05

History had already been wiped away. Wow, that's a wonderful story.

Walter Chambers 50:07

Yeah that's gone. But I did I of course I remembered and I had occasion to write to the retired Vice President, a man named Samuel B. Hayes, who was on the surface, you would say, oh, man, this guy was from the South when he came north years and years ago, and were got a job in New Jersey Bell was out of I think he had taught at Duke University. And I mean a Southerner through and through, he never lost his drawl the whole bit. But, and he ultimately when I came in 64, approved me my hiring. And, and I met him a number of times, and he gave me always gave me good advice, and whatever. So when I did get promoted to his job, he was retired. And I wrote him and said, "Mr. Hayes, I want you to know that I've been promoted to.." and he sent me back the nicest letter, which I still have congratulating me and he says, he says, "Well see. It shows you that even then, we knew that you were like a quality hire." Something like that. Yeah. Yeah. I think he's gone now. But as soon as he retired, I think the next day, he was in his car going back South. And he settled back in North Carolina around Duke University. Yeah, yeah, where he came from.

Robert Curvin 51:36

Yeah. Have you ever met Dennis Bowen(?)? Do you know Dennis?

Walter Chambers 51:40

Oh, sure. Yeah.

Robert Curvin 51:41

Have you ever talked to him about about this?

Walter Chambers 51:44

No, no, I knew, Dennis, I know, Dennis. Yeah.

Robert Curvin 51:48

One of the things he said to me recently is that he said, you know, "Verizon has the probably one of the most outstanding integrated workforces of any company that he knows of in New Jersey." And I said, "Well, are you aware of, you know, where all that history came from?" He said, "Oh I know a little bit about it, but not a lot." In fact, we've talked about possibly, my going and meeting with him sometime and telling him, but it would be wonderful to uh.

Walter Chambers 52:23

Oh, sure, yeah.

Robert Curvin 52:24

And I think that that what you did and what we all did there really created a foundation.

Walter Chambers 52:32

No, it did it did I look back on it and say, you know, those were great years, there were there were certain principles that I applied, that were helpful to me. I don't mean this bragging and anything, but it did, it helped to pave the way, you know, because quite honestly.

Robert Curvin 52:53

The idea of education.

Walter Chambers 52:54

I was the kind of Jackie Robinson in that company in the business. And I knew that, that I can't mess up here. Like I talk about the socialization. I can't be... and there were guys, after me and others, who blew that opportunity, who got carried away. I remember when I shortly after I was there and working at the headquarters building, and there were 3000 employees in that building at its peak. We had a big cafeteria down below, and I would you know, have people in doing business with me when I'd say, "Come on, I'll take you to the cafeteria for lunch or whatever." Well, the guys, I mean, they couldn't eat for looking at all these women. And "oh, oh, how do you do that?" I said, "Wait a minute. Okay. You don't see these people as sex objects, right? It's the people who work with you. And whenever you don't think that way." And don't you? But I, as an example, when I was moved into Operations, I knew that the worst thing and now I got people reporting to me, the thing that you do not do is to have your subordinates teach you the work, the operators in the environment. I learned that on my own or from other sources. I studied as hard as I did when I was in college, you know, reading and going through some of the basic training and that sort of stuff. Sometime later, I had other people as maybe as I moved on to other organizations, say to me, you know, we always had the highest respect for you. Because unlike a lot of other people, you didn't come in here and ask us to teach you the job that you did it on your own, and so on. I knew that meant a lot and that meant a lot to me. Because if you do that, they're going to tell you what they want you to know. Yeah. And so that's, that won't work. I had an advantage when I went into corporate because I was older than the average. I didn't go there, right from...in fact I remember I remember when I met with this man, Mr. Hayes, the Vice President, and I'm getting ready to start. And he had me up his office and whatever. And he said, "Oh, Chambers, we're very happy to have you come here and work with us. Just wish you when younger." I said, "What is he talking about?" At the time I think I was like, 31 years old. And, and then I realized what he's talking about, that they prefer you to come in right out of college, and they can get, you know, like 40 years of work out of you. Because you come there and you carve out a career, right? Yeah, (unintelligable) get from me with 30 plus, yeah. So, but I said, "I'm not old I'm 31 years old."

Robert Curvin 55:49

Yeah. Let me if I can jump ahead a little bit too to the period of the Riot. And you were still in Newark at the time.

Walter Chambers 56:00

I still lived in Newark on Seymour Avenue.

Robert Curvin 56:02

And you were still done at headquarters?

Walter Chambers 56:04

No, no, no, no, I was based at that time I was in working with telephone operators and my office was up in technically Orange on the Orange East Orange Border, Halsey St in East Orange. In fact, the I think the riots happened, it they broke out on the Thursday night. I went to work that Friday morning going from going from Newark, from Seymour Avenue up to East Orange. I was, then the National Guard came in, literally closed down the city. I couldn't get back home for two days. I didn't sleep in the office up there. And finally on Saturday evening, I said, "Wait a minute. I don't have a change your clothes or anything. I gotta I gotta get home. Yeah. So that Saturday afternoon or maybe it was a day before I Jen (then?) tried to get back in. And I came down the Parkway and I couldn't get off at Irvington Center where I normally did to come in. I had to go all the way down to Hillside and try to come back in through Weequahic. National Guard stopped me. And I said, "Hey look!" and I flashed my telephone company ID. And I said, "I work for the phone company. And I live in this area, I gotta get home." And he let me in. So I went home and got a change of clothes and whatever and went back for the duration. And I stayed another two nights, slept in my office. And then came, I think Monday or Tuesday I was able to get back in. So so but I was right there. Clinton lived off of Clinton Avenue. And that was like one of the first places hit. It was a big furniture store at the corner. And that was hit.

Robert Curvin 58:00

When did your family decide to move out of Newark?

Walter Chambers 58:07

By the time the Riots hit I had two children, and I lived in a two family house, I had an apartment there. We needed more space. So I left Newark in 68, a year after. I didn't leave because of that, but I needed and I got a great buy on this house in the northern far north end of East Orange. In today's prices, I got it for a steal.

Robert Curvin 58:35

Ampere Parkway over in that area?

Walter Chambers 58:36

In that area that's right. Well, four blocks from Bloomfield, North Arlington.

Robert Curvin 58:42

And that's where you are now?

Walter Chambers 58:44

That's where I am now. That's where I intend to be. I'm not moving. I'm too old to go through that. And I told my kids and I'm a saver of everything. That stuff I gave you, right? I live in a big, huge house that's usable from from basement to attic. It gives me plenty of room to save things. Because someday somebody would want it like the documents I'm sharing with you, are more than 50 years old. Yeah.

But, and my other stuff I have means nothing to anybody but me. So my two children have instructions when I pass on you just back a dumpster up there, and just toss all this stuff. But I got articles and stuff that go way back to the civil rights era and whatever. Great stuff. Yeah, I could use a catalog.

Robert Curvin 59:38

You sure somebody should not get in there and archive this stuff for you. It'd be a nice collection to have that.

Walter Chambers 59:47

Yeah. Yeah, if you really you know want to get a history and frankly through the media, yeah, magazine articles and all that stuff. I got the preliminary articles about Roots before (unintelligible) published

Robert Curvin 1:00:00

Is that right? Yeah, yeah. He had a couple of essays in one of them was in a men's magazine, Esquire, I guess. Your narrative about your corporate experience is really unique. Yeah. Let me let me quickly ask you about Newark today. Yes. What are your thoughts about the city?

Walter Chambers 1:00:25

Well as a native Newarker and still I feel a Newarker at heart, you know, my mailing address is East Orange but my heart is Newark. And whenever I'm out and people ask your home community, I always say Newark. Although chronologically, I've spent more years now in East Orange than I have in Newark but that's still Newark is my root. I resent the fact that what most people know about Newark, nationally and internationally, is 1967 up. They don't know anything about the rich history of Newark, and what it was. You say Newark and it's almost a total reaction, "Oh, the riots, that city, oh the worst city" and, and I resent that very much. I resent those who perpetuate that history. And I tell people, we had a history before that. That Newark, in 1966, celebrated its 300th year of its founding. We had big celebrations here in Newark, and uh, nobody ever talks about that. Right. But there was a minister from Florida who had that role. In fact, his son was in one of my summer youth programs on the NCCJ. I remember it well. And that was...

Robert Curvin 1:01:52

Let's go back to today...and...

Walter Chambers 1:01:55

But I was saying that Newark, Newark's history, as I remind people, there was a rich history that predates 1967, we existed before 1967. But remember now 1967 to the present, what, some 43 years, two generations, that's all they know, right? That's all they know, about Newark, New Jersey, right? They know nothing about the positives. That's why I appreciate the Newark History Society to try to capture some of that, that that real history, the positive and the pre 1967 Newark, that we existed as a very positive city, the largest, richest city, in New Jersey, and so on. And in every way, we didn't always have poor intergroup relations. I thought nothing of, you know, those young years, I didn't have a car. If I started driving late in life growing up in a city, we had excellent public transportation, my college and post college years, I spent a lot of time in New York, because that's where a lot of my schoolmates and others were coming in late at night, the bus to my area stopped running one at one or 2am. So I had to

walk from Penn Station home, I didn't think anything of it, okay. Living in Pennington Court in a public housing project, you'd keep your doors unlocked. You go visit somebody, you ring the bell and walk in, okay. And that's how life was for us. We didn't think anything of Newark being a dangerous city, every city in the United States of any size anyway, always had areas where you didn't go, you know, late at night, or whatever. And that's for sure. I remember. As a senior in high school 1947, I got a job. And this was, when you talked about support, I got this job working in the A&P clerk in the old A&P, grocery store, and little stores that existed before the large supermarkets that we experience today, but there were corner stores. And the A&P was one of the big, big chains. So I, I there was one near me, and a Polish classmate of mine work there in the one in my neighborhood. And he said, Chambers, I'm gonna get you a job in the A&P. And he recommended me to the district manager. This is when we were senior in high school. I took the little tests and all the tests was you were interviewed and the test that they gave you never forget it. But they gave you columns of features, and you had to add them up. Because in those years, it's before when I called the dummy cash registers. So you had a big order you wrote down the (drop?) on the paper bag and you added up the columns. So then I was graded, that that adding and so I got the job. So soon as I turned 16 (had?) working papers and all I was assigned to the store at Spruce and Somerset, right in the heart of the old Third Ward. Now I'm from Down Neck. And I'm thinking that everybody there is going to know I'm from Down Neck. And what are you doing up here? It was like I had a sign on me. So the store hours store closes six by the time we you know cleaned up did whatever. When I got out of there was 6:30 it was the middle of winter is dark out. I'm scared to death going home. So I used to go down Spruce Street Hill hauling my butt running, running running down that hill until I got to Lincoln Park and said (panting) I'm home, I'm in my area. It was it was misplaced. Nobody ever, ever, ever said anything to me. I... right across the street from the store was Keller's drugstore, Black-owned. I knew Billy Keller we he was at South Side and I was at East Side we knew each other. And we were friends but no nobody ever bothered me it was misplaced. But that's the point about how you felt in the era. To this day, I run into people. I know you used to work at the A&P. I said, that was, talking 60 years ago, you kidding me. Yeah, but they remember. So it's Newark is a large city, but in many ways a village. Okay. Because so many of us, particularly in the back, black community stayed here. We still live here are close by. So the circles, inter interconnect, and you can talk to people and who knows, one knows, one knows one. And we end up that we know each other very much, as I said, a village. And I enjoy that. And that's why I would never move away my last five years of work in the telephone company, I was assigned to Virginia, and I had Arlington, Virginia, and I had an apartment down there, but I also still maintained my house here, because I knew I was gonna retire. See, I planned my retirement, I knew he's gonna retire 10 years before I did, and I announced it to the company, that I'm not working a day past. What did I say, Oh, by April 1, 1994. And the rationale, I turned 62, in December of 63, remember, I said I started in March 64, I will have had 30 years of service. That's enough. And I thought there was something decadent about working until 65. Right? I didn't want to stay. Right. So but they gave me a great assignment in my last two years. And I wanted to see that through. So I extended eight months for them. My last day of work was December 7, 1994. And I never looked back. And but anyway, I, but my roots, again, were always here. I knew I was coming back. That was this temporary down there. When I was transferred there. And my boss said, set me up and said, you know, what would you? What would you say if I told you you're going to be assigned to Virginia? I said, Well, if you asking me, do I want to go to Virginia? The answer is no. If you tell me that's where my job is, is. I gotta go on because I want to work another five years. I went.

Robert Curvin 1:09:04

Now, you made the the important point about pre 1967 The city had a life that things were very different. And there was much to enjoy. But I I would say, can't you say there's still a lot to do? There was a lot to enjoy even after 1967?

Walter Chambers 1:09:24

Oh, yes. Absolutely. No question about it. Yeah, that Newark was still vibrant. Even after that. But I'm just thinking of the image, right. You know, we were the butt of all the late night TV, and even to this day, yeah. You remember the comments that that guy made when they were when the arena first opened when the Rock, the Prudential arena opened downtown and this guy made some idiotic comment about the city and whatever, to this day those things happen. And he had even been here, right, but no, no, no, no, they're, you know, I'm a great jazz fan. Every Friday, I'm at the Priory. Right and, and what I call our jazz posse right. Now, Sundays the Skipper's (?) down, right, and we do that every week. Right and others. So now now we got a lot going on here. Yeah. And, and I think a great great and I every time I see him, I say that to Larry Goldman. I think NJPAC is absolute plus, I don't care who gets credit for bringing the error I've seen recently that people were telling Sharpe for bringing it here and so on. Well, whoever. I haven't been to the Arena yet, but I understand it's great. Yeah, I was struck. I was on a train coming back from Pennsylvania last year sometime and on a Saturday. And as I was coming up from New Brunswick, and as the train kept coming up the New Jersey Transit stopping at all the stations it kept loading up loading up of hockey fans coming to Newark, the train by the time to train got to New York, it was loaded. I said this is fantastic. Fan of Tennessee (?), and they were people when they said they were going to put the arena there. Oh that'll never go people will never come to Newark, same thing on PAC. Right. They'll never come to Newark. I don't know. I personally don't know or read about heard about whatever. Any incident involving people going to PAC. Don't know of it, okay. And I remember being on a plane going somewhere it is shortly after PAC opened. And there was a lady and a couple of kids sitting across from me and we engaged in conversation and she found out where's all my husband's she lived way out in suburbia someplace, "Oh, my husband and I have subscriptions to PAC. We just love it there." And at the time, the Priory still had dinners and all. And I was giving her names of places to go for dinner. And (?) is since the Rock opened, I see on the list of places to eat the Jay's as an example, places to go. So I'm sure they picked up business as a result of that, yeah, of course, you got the Ironbound The Portuguese, all those restaurants along Ferry Street and throughout that area, and so on. So Newark has a lot going for it today.

Robert Curvin 1:12:39

What do you think? I mean, if I've asked everybody this question, by the way, at the end of the interview, if you had some teenagers here who wanted to make their life in Newark, and what would you say to them?

Walter Chambers 1:12:58

I would say if you appreciate an urban center, this is a good place to be. I happen to be personally an urban guy. Okay, I never contemplated that I want to live in suburbia. And I, of course been out there worked out there and so on. And but if you want an urban center, that you can relate to, you know, as opposed to a huge place like New York City, I think Newark is the place to be okay. We always brag

about our poor transportation. And it's true, you know, we got the airport, we got the train station, you can get anywhere from here. You know, I tell the people who don't know our area, that in 20 minutes, I can be in downtown New York. Okay. I don't have to live there. I'm over here. So so we have so many advantages of of almost urban-suburban, in a city of Newark, I think two of the greatest institutions in this whole area. And friends of mine, they were in the field say that, to me nationally, are the Newark Museum, and the Newark Library, outstanding institutions, and have a reputation as such, particularly the Museum. And so we, again, we are not what these other people are depicting, we are well beyond that. And people will come in and say, "Gee, this is great". I have never... if I have an out-of-towner, who's been here for the first time or whatever, I try to have enough time. And if I'm driving them, take him for a little spin around, particularly around downtown Newark to see it. Now, you know, memory wise, there are always some things that you say and... I'm unhappy with, you know, I occasionally and very often I know why my travels don't take me through Broad and Market more often. But my memory goes back to what used to be and is not. And that bothers me.

Robert Curvin 1:15:16

Yeah. I'm gonna stop it right there. Final comment. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to add? Because I want to see this as also a chance for you to tell your story.

Walter Chambers 1:15:30

Well, I for one, and I may be sort of intimated that throughout. I'm still optimistic about Newark, reestablishing itself. I don't know if we'll ever get back to what we were pre 67 in terms of reputation because there are those who won't let us. There are historians who won't let us. There was those stupid comedians who won't let us, you know. But I think in the reality of the thing is that we will, that there will be generations of people who will move back to Newark because the events of 67 and and up in years thereafter will become a much a much dimmer memory. And to the degree that that happens, you know, people'll say, Well, what is a riot? You know, when we get to that point, then I think Newark has arrived. And I think there are generations of people who appreciate an urban center, you know, the ideal now. And I think an example of that is in the Ironbound section. I, when I was involved in planning the program with a couple of people that we presented on the Ironbound

Robert Curvin 1:16:59

Now, let's describe what that program was because people won't know.

Walter Chambers 1:17:02

Ok, quickly the Newark History Society and organization, I don't know 8, 10 years old that focuses on exactly that, the history of Newark and presents a wide range of discussion programs dealing with Newark we recently in in the current year, did a program on the Ironbound at my suggestion. And I was on the planning committee and served as a moderator of that, at that program that discussion. Now, uh, one of the women, one of the persons on the committee with me, Nancy Zak, who heads up a community group in the Ironbound who lives in Ironbound, and whose daughter, by the way, is a freshman finishing her freshman year at Princeton. But Nancy, when we first met she and uh Dan O'Flaherty which is interesting you know his mother goes back to the Carlin administration labor leader or something but anyway she, uh, told me that, "You know, they're they're just finishing up building a new apartment, condo development, right across from Pennington Court", Newark's oldest public

housing project, a project that that of just a few years ago, they were thinking of tearing down like they are Baxter. But they decided against it rehabbed it, it's still going. So I had to check it out. I went by there, and I am amazed. I am amazed at this. Directly across the street, you would say, "Well, who wants to live across from a public housing project." I got to think that what for what they built there, that somebody had to do an extensive market study and know that they could sell them, but I think it's part rental and then you can also condo you can purchase. But to me that is evidence of the viability of this city. And it's certainly a section of this city. I look in the Central Ward and you look at a Society Hill and and some of the developments that have gone up there and that where people, you know, have stayed and are living. So I think there is great life and a great future for Newark. And I'm still proud to say I'm from Newark.

Robert Curvin 1:19:34

Thank you.